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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the responses of 50 practicing business managers who were asked to identify the most troublesome communication situations experienced by supervisors in their organizations. The authors put the responses in rank order according to two popular management systems, Management by Objectives (MBO) and Organizational Behavior Modification (OBMod), and draw the following conclusions: Teachers of management students should stress communication skills needed for motivating people, delegating authority, listening, giving directions, and group problem solving. Students who will work in OBMod systems need to learn communication skills for handling grievances, while those students entering MBO systems need skills for private, one-to-one conferences. The study also concludes that teachers should not increase their emphasis of public-speaking skills. (RL)

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ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION AND MANAGEMENT BY OBJECTIVES: IMPLICATIONS FOR CHANGE IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION TRAINING

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ABSTRACT

This study asked practicing managers to identify the problematic communication situations experienced by supervisors in their organizations. Prior research had asked recent graduates to identify communication behaviors based on how important those behaviors seemed to be, not on whether those behaviors presented problems. The present study was conducted within the framework of two widely discussed management systems: Organizational Behavior Modification and Management by Objectives. Identification of problematic communication situations by managers in these systems suggests where time and resources need to be placed in speech communication education.

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Organizational Behavior Modification and Management by Objectives:
Implications for Change in Organizational Communication Training

Increasingly over the past few years departments of speech communication have been turning to career oriented instruction. This shift has been reflected in the literature in such articles as the one Vincent DiSalvo, David Larson and Bill Seiler[1] published in a recent issue of Communication Education. It is also reflected in the flood of new materials which has recently become available for adoption in courses in organizational communication. This literary activity has been generated, in large measure, by the kind of inquiry which would allow researchers to infer what kinds of instruction, and in what particular skills, we should be teaching to accommodate the career oriented student.

A major argument of the present essay is that the researchers have been asking the wrong questions, based on the wrong assumptions, and have arrived at the wrong conclusions.

Typically, researchers have set up categories which they believe to be important, and then they ask responders from the business community to focus upon the importance of those categories. The questions yield statements from the responders about the importance of the categories, which in turn lets the researcher infer what we ought be teaching. We wish to argue that, while the questions are interesting,

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they are not enough. They certainly don't warrant the suggestions about what we should be teaching that have begun to appear in our journals.

The most recent example of this kind of research was the DiSalvo, Larson and Seiler article just mentioned. They wanted to find out the communication skills needed by persons in business organizations, so they asked recent graduates from their university to rank order ten (10) types of communication skills on the basis of importance. In order of importance as related to job success, the ten skill areas reported by DiSalvo and his colleagues were:

1. listening
2. persuading
3. advising
4. instructing
5. small group problem solving
6. routine information exchange
7. small group leadership
8. interviewing
9. giving orders
10. public speaking

A researcher may ask, as DiSalvo and his colleagues did--and as, earlier, Jim Lohr[2] did--that the responder to a questionnaire mention the <u>importance</u> of a communication skill. In addition, in asking the question, a researcher may use language more typical of the academy than typical of the business community. Indeed, this procedure led DiSalvo, Larson and Seiler to find that "advising" is extremely important. But what does this finding mean? "Advising" might mean "giving directions" or it might be understood to mean "persuading." Assuming we could know what the responder meant when he or she agreed that "advising" was important, what could we

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conclude? Would it be viable to conclude that "advising" is also a problem area? Mere importance is not sufficient grounds to warrant major decisions about the way we train young people, for it does not tell us what those who are being trained have difficulty doing. It seems clear to us that researchers need to move beyond the current concern about mere importance. And it seems clear that we need to try to discover how the business community uses language to talk about communication behaviors and what it considers to be troublesome. At least, we need to do these things if we wish to make meaningful guesses about the training we ought to provide our career oriented students.

In an earlier research one of us tried to discover what words people in the business community actually used to talk about their communication problems. To do this a pilot study was conducted in the Rockford, Illinois, area. A questionnaire was developed which included both objective type and open-ended questions designed to get language samples from respondents as they talked about communication in their companies. Three of the questions, different only with regard to the category of employee, read: "Suppose the Department of Speech Communication would design a course especially for your employees who are at the _____ level. What are the three most important speech communication skills these employees should get from the course?" The categories were "management," "supervisory," and "labor force."

Language patterns emerged from a wide variety of responses to the open-ended questions in this pilot study. In addition, the questions yielded a clearer picture of the communication problems experienced by the respondents.

In the main study of that earlier research responses were secured from the Chief Executive Officers of 55 companies ranging in size from eight employees to seven thousand employees. One set of questions in that research asked the

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respondent to rank the five most troublesome communication situations from among eleven suggested possibilities and two blank spaces marked "other." These rankings were made three times--once for each of the three categories of employee.

So Hanna's research was asking not about "importance," but about "trouble." And it was asking in language which was familiar to people in the business community. The results were strikingly different from those reported earlier. For example, based on "importance" as his subjects responded, Lohr concluded that public speaking skills should be more heavily emphasized. DiSalvo, Larson and Seiler asked a more subtle question about relative importance among ten skill areas in relation to job success. "Public Speaking" moved from first rank in Lohr's study to tenth in DiSalvo, Larson and Seiler's study--a finding which seems to us more consistent with realities in the business community.

In line with DiSalvo, Larson and Seiler's rankings, Hanna found that the skill of "formal presentation"--language used by people in the business community--was ranked low. You can take this finding to mean that the instruction we are giving in the relevant skills is adequate, or you can take it to mean that whatever the experiences are which yield skills in public speaking, those experiences are adequate. But you cannot conclude that we should increase the amount of time or energy or resources we presently spend in teaching public speaking skills.

Table I

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Here it seems useful to describe what we mean by "weighted" and "unweighted" rankings. One measure of the most troublesome communication is to attach power to the ranking assigned by a responder to a particular item. Another way is merely to count the frequency of mention of an item, regardless of how it was ranked by a responder. By assigning ranking power to a mention, an item ranked "1st" by a responder would get a power of five. An item marked "2nd" would get a power of four, and so forth. On the other hand, if any mention, regardless of rank, received only a power of one, then simple count of mentions would yield a priority list.

The second table presents unweighted and weighted rankings of the troublesome communication situations for managers in the Rockford study. The figures show a general view of the communication problems in the business community as managers understood them. If we wish to be helpful in providing skills to those who want or need training in areas commonly problematic for managers, then we need to focus upon those problems which are problematic for managers.

Table II

The assumption that our students are management bound, of course, may be made only with relative confidence. For instance, our students in the required fundamentals of speech communication course represent all five colleges in our university. Not all of those people will wish to train in preparation for management positions. But nearly all of the students in our business and industrial courses plan to pursue careers in

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some management position or another, and others plan to work as supervisors. So we're assuming that a good many of our students do plan to enter the business and industrial community, are management bound, and would like directly applicable instruction. It occurred to us that differences in management systems into which career bound students move might make important differences in how they need to be able to communicate.

We decided to focus on two management systems which we believe are currently popular, and widely discussed in the literature--Management By Objectives (MBO) and Organizational Behavior Modification (OBMod). These two systems are dramatically different in the presumptions they make about the people in the organizations. The presumption of OBMod is Skinnerian. It suggests that learning occurs as a result of behavior which is rewarded. So the OBMod manager looks for behaviors in line with company goals, rewards those behaviors, and theoretically, at least, there-by increases the likelihood that they'll be repeated. Management By Objectives, on the other hand, asks the individual to express himself or herself in terms of that person's personal goals. Together with the employee, the MBO manager determines which goals are compatible, agrees on a sequence of events which will yield the objectives, and a schedule of periodic and final reviews of performance as performance relates to achievement of the objectives.

What we wished to find out is whether or not there would be any differences, and what the differences, if any, would imply about the kind

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of training we should be providing management bound students. Could one or the other management system change the kinds of skills training we should be giving? We assumed that priorities might change some.

We collected responses to a 5-page questionnaire in which we asked about this curiosity, among other things. Fifty (50) managers from area businesses ranging in size from two employees to 17,000 employees answered our questions. There are two relevant ways to look at the data we collected from them.

Again it is possible to look at the gross responses in terms of either weighted or unweighted frequency of mention of the situations which are most troublesome to responders. Remember, "weighted" means allowing a power of five for a first ranking, four for a second ranking, etc., and "unweighted" means simply counting one point for each mention, regardless of ranking.

Table III

The third table shows the rank ordered listing of communication skill areas, both unweighted and weighted, for all responders regardless of the managerial system used in their respective companies. Notice that the top five entries, in order of their priority, are essentially similar to the earlier Hanna listing. Now notice that "formal presentation" has dropped from sixth to ninth or tenth place. We don't know why this shift has occurred, but we believe it argues that we should not increase the amount of energy or effort we presently spend on teaching the skills of public speaking.

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In addition we note a shift upward, from ninth position to seventh position, of the entry "private, 1-to-1 conference." "Handling grievances" has made a similar movement upward. We can't conclude that these small shifts imply a need for us to reevaluate our current curricular offerings.

Finally, we'd like to show you one more table. It shows how responses compare when the lists are broken out according to whether the responder was in an OBMod system or an MBO system. We show it to you because it seems to us to imply that, if we could predict the kind of managerial system a person will enter, we might be better able to tailor his training in communication skills.

Table IV

Notice that "private, 1-to-1 conference" moves into the top five ranks in Management By Objective systems, while "handling grievances" moves into the top five ranks for OBMod systems. We suspect that these changes say more about the managerial systems than they say about the kind of communication skills training people might need to move into those systems. But, remember, these lists are ranked according to how troublesome the situations seem to managers already working in the business/industrial community. We believe they know what they're talking about.

Conclusions. Based on the results of this study, with the qualification that the findings may not apply universally, we believe these things:

1. that researchers have been asking the wrong questions of the wrong audience--and coming to the wrong conclusions about what

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we ought to be teaching career-oriented students.

2. that, if we want to teach courses which are geared toward career oriented students, then we should stress the communication skills involved in motivating people, delegating authority, listening, direction giving and group problem solving.
3. that, if we could predict what kind of managerial system our students are likely to enter, and if we could know it to be either OBMod or MBO, then we might wish to include more focus on the skills involved in handling grieviences and private 1-to-1 conferences.
4. that we should not, as some might argue, increase the amount of time or energy we presently devote to teaching the skills of public speaking.

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FOOTNOTES

[1]Vincent DiSalvo, David C. Larsen and William J. Seiler, "Communication Skills Needed by Persons in Business Organizations," Communication Education, 25 (1976), 269.

[2]James W. Lohr, "Alumni Use of Communication Activities and Recommended Activities for the Basic Course: A Summary," The Speech Teacher, 23 (1974), 248.

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Table I

Comparison Between DiSalvo and Hanna Rankings

DiSalvo Rankings	Hanna Rankings
1. Listening	1. Motivating People
2. Persuading	2. Delegating Authority
3. Advising	3. Listening
4. Instructing	4. Group Problem Solving
5. Small Group Problem Solving	5. Giving Directions
6. Routine Information Exchange	6. Formal Presentations
7. Small Group Leadership	7. Conference Leadership
8. Interviewing	8. Handling Grievances
9. Giving Orders	9. Using Grapevine/Private 1-to-1 Conferences
10. Public Speaking	10. Negotiation & Bargaining

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Table II

Most Troublesome Communication Situations for Managers

Unweighted Totals		Weighted Totals	
1.	Motivating People 46	1.	Motivating People 168
2.	Delegating Authority . . . 41	2.	Delegating Authority . . . 139
3.	Listening 33	3.	Listening 109
4.	Group Problem Solving . . . 31	4.	Giving Directions 99
5.	Giving Directions 30	5.	Group Problem Solving . . . 92
6.	Formal Presentation 17	6.	Formal Presentation 38
			Using the Grapevine 38
7.	Conference Leadership . . . 16	7.	Conference Leadership . . . 33
8.	Handling Grievances 14	8.	Handling Grievances 32
9.	Private (1-to-1) Conferences 12	9.	Private (1-to-1) Conferences 31
	Using the Grapevine 12		
10.	Negotiations & Bargaining . 9	10.	Negotiations & Bargaining . 21
11.	Other 2	11.	Other 10
12.	Other 0	12.	Other 0

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Table III

Most Troublesome Communication Situations for Managers: OBMod/MBO Study

Unweighted Totals		Weighted Totals	
1. Motivating People	44	1. Motivating People	176
2. Listening	41	2. Listening	144
3. Delegating Authority	34	3. Delegating Authority	100
4. Group Problem Solving	33	4. Giving Directions	94
5. Giving Directions	31	5. Group Problem Solving	45
6. Handling Grievances	20	6. Handling Grievances	42
7. Private, 1-to-1 Conference	17	7. Private, 1-to-1 Conference	39
8. Conference Leadership	6	8. Conference Leadership	15
9. Formal Presentation	6	9. Negotiation and Bargaining	14
10. Negotiation and Bargaining	5	10. Formal Presentation	9
11. Using the Grapevine	3	11. Using the Grapevine	4
12. Other	1	12. Other	2

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Table IV

Most Troublesome Communication by Management System

Management by Objectives			Organizational Behavior Modification		
	weighted	unweighted		weighted	unweighted
1. Motivating People	26	105	1. Motivating People	16	71
2. Listening	26	94	2. Listening	15	50
3. Delegating Authority	22	63	3. Giving Directions	13	38
4. Giving Directions	18	56	4. Delegating Authority	12	37
5. Private 1-to-1 Conference	13	32	5. Handling Grievances	10	24
6. Group Problem Solving	13	30	6. Group Problem Solving	8	15
7. Handling Gievances	10	18	7. Private 1-to-1 Conferences	4	7
8. Conference Leadership	5	11	8. Formal Presentation	4	5
9. Negotiation & Bargaining	4	10	9. Negotiation & Bargaining	1	4
10. Formal Presentation	2	4	10. Conference Leadership	1	4
11. Using the Grapevine	2	2	11. Using the Grapevine	1	2
12. Other	1	2	12. Other	0	0

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